

LIBERATING THE DISABLED IDENTITY:
A COALITION OF SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES

This thesis is presented by Rose Galvin BSc, BA (hons) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2004.

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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My thesis explores the notion, originally developed by sociologists such as Goffman and Charmaz, that a person's identity undergoes a difficult and painful metamorphosis in response to the effects of serious long-term impairment or chronic illness. I argue that existing methods of researching what I have come to call "the disabled identity" generally avoid a deeper exploration of the social context in which this kind of marginalisation occurs. To address this absence, I develop a research methodology which combines an intensive exploration of the personal experience of disability with a critical analysis of the social and historical context in which the disabling of identity occurs. I approach the former through grounded theory and the latter through a Foucaultian analytics of genealogy and governmentality. These are informed by the theoretical insights surrounding the "social model" of disability which claims that "disability" is not a physical problem based on personal tragedy but is a social imposition based on exclusion and stigmatisation.

In accordance with this, the thesis proceeds in three successive stages. First, I apply a genealogical analysis to disability in general, then more specifically to the disabled identity, to provide the background for my qualitative research. The purpose of genealogy is to reveal that the concept under investigation is not a self-evident "given" but a social construction which has developed to serve varying interests over time. Through this process it becomes evident that disability has evolved as a concept which performs as a counterpoint to the norm and, as such, provides a measure of "what not to be" in terms of contemporary neoliberal citizenship.

Next, I engage in a grounded theory study which draws on the stories of disabled people to explore how their self-perceptions and the attitudes of those around them have been affected by disability. These stories stem from a variety of data sources, including my dialogues with participants, written stories from participants, and published autobiographies. Their analysis results in the emergence of the following themes: independence, occupational identity, and sexuality/appearance. Each theme is discussed in a separate chapter which attempts to let the stories speak for themselves by way of lengthy excerpts from the participants and texts, and combines them, where relevant, with my own insights and experiences as a disabled person.

In the final stage, I use a governmentality analysis to explore these themes and to place them in their current social and historical context. Here I suggest that independence, work and sexuality are key factors which are used to divide the affiliated from the marginalised in contemporary neoliberal societies. I argue that the two "technologies" which currently have the most impact on how independence, work and sexuality are governed in relation to disability are welfare reform and sexual rehabilitation. Here I explore the available primary sources - particularly the last five years of Australian government policy on welfare reform and a selection of sexual rehabilitation texts - to reveal how governance seeks to operate as a liberatory force while remaining oppressive due to its paternalism and reinforcement of normative prescriptions.

The final chapter further problematises disability in relation to the governmental concepts of “self-esteem” and “empowerment” in an attempt to unpick what can be claimed to be emancipatory from what remains embedded in the dominant discourse. By ‘deconstructing necessity’ and exploring the root causes of oppression through what Foucault refers to as ‘the disinterment of subjugated knowledges’, the thesis outlines an alternative discourse in relation to “disability” and opens up new possibilities for the creation of more positive identities.

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Publications Stemming From Thesis Chapters

The following papers have originated from the early drafts of my thesis chapters.

Galvin, R. (2003a) The making of the disabled identity: A linguistic analysis of marginalisation. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 23(2): 149-178. [Based on an earlier draft of Chapter Three].

Galvin, R. (2003b) The paradox of disability culture: The need to combine versus the imperative to let go. *Disability & Society*, 18(5): 675-690. [Based on an earlier draft of Chapter Four].

Galvin, R. (2003c) The function of language in the creation and liberation of disabled identities: From Saussure to contemporary strategies of government. *Australian Communications Journal*, 30 (3): 83-100. [Drawn from a combination of early drafts of Chapters Three and Nine].

Galvin, R. (2003d) Review of 'Disability: A Life Course Approach'. *Journal of Sociology*, 40 (1): 89: 92. [Based on the central arguments of Chapter One].

Galvin, R. (2004a) Challenging the need for gratitude: Comparisons between paid and unpaid care for disabled people. *Journal of Sociology*, 40(2): 137-155. [Based on a sub-category of the data teased out in Chapter Six].

Galvin, R. (2004b) Can welfare reform make disability disappear? *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 39(3): 343-355. [Based on an early draft of Chapter Nine].

Galvin, R. (2005) Researching the disabled identity: Contextualising the identity losses which accompany the onset of impairment. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 27(3): 393-413. [Focuses on describing the grounded theory component of the research, covered in Chapters Five to Eight, but incorporating, in the discussion section of the paper, the Foucaultian analytics which frame all the other chapters].

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